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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000061

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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE ON MADRID INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFERENCE

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[1](#)B. B) 07 VATICAN 180 (NOTAL)
[1](#)C. C) VATICAN 44 AND PREVIOUS (NOTAL)

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CLASSIFIED BY: RFOLEY, A/DCM.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: For the Holy See, the most important aspect of the July 16 to 18 Madrid inter-religious conference (reftel A) is the fact that the Saudi King was firmly behind it. The Madrid conference was disappointing in its failure to address religious freedom and, to a lesser extent, to set up dates for further, follow-up meetings. The Holy See hopes that the Saudis' substantial involvement in the world of inter-religious dialogue will lead to concrete measures advancing freedom of religion. From Post's perspective, the USG interest in inter-religious dialogue is twofold: first, to promote platforms that allow representatives of the overwhelming majority of Muslims who reject violence the possibility of speaking up against terrorism; and second, to promote religious freedom, which is often a catalyst for all fundamental human rights. End SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) On July 22 A/DCM met with Monsignor Alberto Ortega, Director for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States at the Holy See's Secretariat of State Section for Relations with States (ministry of foreign affairs equivalent) to discuss the Madrid conference. A/DCM also met with Monsignor Khaled Akasheh on July 23. Akasheh is the point person for the Middle East at the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and a member of the Holy See delegation to the conference.

WHY DIALOGUE?

[1](#)3. (C) Monsignor Ortega welcomed the Saudi initiative to convene the conference, tracing it to the Pope's meeting with the Saudi King on November 19, 2007 (reftel B). Ortega thought that King Abdallah was aware of freedom of worship developments in Qatar (i.e., the opening of a Catholic Church there) and of the Jordanian royal family's support for the Amman-based Aal Al-Bayt institute's "A Common Word" inter-religious dialogue initiative (reftel C). Ortega believes that these two developments, together with ongoing efforts to improve the image of Islam in the post 9/11 world, influenced Abdallah to convene the Madrid meeting and counter the possibility of having the Custodian of Islam's Holy Places sidelined in discussions about the present and future of Islam.

[1](#)4. (C) Ortega lamented that no date had been fixed for a Madrid

follow-up meeting that would help to establish a continuous Saudi-sponsored inter-religious dialogue, in the way that the "A common Word" dialogue has been institutionalized through the Catholic-Muslim Forum. At the same time, he said, the Holy See understands that the Saudis have to proceed with caution because of internal opposition and the risk of a backlash against the King if he proceeds too boldly. For Ortega, a great value of inter-religious dialogue with Muslim representatives is its effect on different currents of thought within Islam. Even if there are no "Muslim concessions" vis-à-vis Christians, dialogue has the positive effect of raising the profile of Muslim leaders that unambiguously denounce and oppose violence in the name of religion, as did the final declaration of the conference.

ATTAINING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

15. (C) Monsignor Akasheh also welcomed the initiative, noting that Saudi sponsorship was more important than the actual substance of the discussions that took place. Akasheh stated that the conference was a good --even if limited-- first step in a dialogue he hopes would help change attitudes among an influential segment of Islamic leaders and institutions. He noted as an example of such institutions the organizer of the meeting, the World Muslim League (WML). According to Akasheh, the WML, ironically, has a formal "committee to prevent the spread of Christianity".

16. (SBU) In addressing the shortfalls of the meeting, Akasheh referred to the statements that the President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, Cardinal Jean Louis Tauran made to the L'Osservatore Romano newspaper on July 23. Tauran, who headed the Holy See's delegation, criticized the failure of the conference final declaration to address religious freedom. This means, Tauran said, that considerable problems remain in understanding the difference between freedom of worship and religious freedom. Previously, the Cardinal had stated that "it is vital that religious freedom be considered as more than the important necessity of having places of worship --which is the least one can expect. Religious freedom must also include the

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opportunity for believers to actively participate in public discourse."

17. (C) Akasheh said that the Holy See understands that in certain countries with a Muslim majority change will only come incrementally, if it comes at all. (Note: Akasheh advocated the terminology "countries with a Muslim majority" rather than "Muslim" or "Islamic" countries. End note.) He added, however, that as a matter of principle the Holy See will always promote true freedom of religion, which includes, among other things, the right to convert from one religion to another.

COMMENT

18. (C) While the Holy See agreed with and welcomed the Madrid meeting's condemnation of terrorism, it expects more from inter-religious dialogue. There is a sense among Holy See officials and Catholic commentators that inter-religious meetings are primarily motivated by Muslim leaders' legitimate goal of improving the image of Islam. That Islam is not a violent religion is something that the Holy See will not dispute publicly, particularly since the Pope's September 2006 Regensburg address, which some Muslims interpreted as the Pope's equating Islam with violence. What the Holy See wants to get out of inter-religious dialogue with Muslim representatives is their assistance, commitment and concrete action --where it is within their power as political leaders--to achieve true freedom of religion.

GLENDON